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SIPDIS

STATE FOR CM (THORNTON) S/P (GREEN) AND D (LEE)

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SUBJECT: BEIJING OLYMPICS FAIL TO IMPROVE FRENCH VIEWS ON CHINA

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[1](#)B. PARIS POINTS E-MAIL OCTOBER 3 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Kathy Allegrone, reasons 1.
4 (b/d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (SBU) The French public watched the Beijing Summer Olympics in large numbers and with interest but came away without an appreciable change in their generally downbeat views on China. Our reading from contacts in discussions since the August 24 closing ceremony is that in the current context of economic uncertainty, China continues to represent a potential threat in the eyes of the French public. France's government and parliament have no intention to change tack with respect to China and plan to continue what officials described as a "reactive" and "realistic" approach to the bilateral relationship. Media coverage of the Games was considerable, although the Russia-Georgia crisis and an ambush in Afghanistan that killed 10 French soldiers August 18 shifted the spotlight away from Beijing. Commentary since the Olympics has mixed praise for China's athletic and logistical performance with criticism of its human rights record and lack of openness. End summary.

Blanket Coverage of the Games

[1](#)2. (C) French television provided blanket coverage of the Games, which snagged an average 25.6 percent market share, slightly better than for the Athens Olympics in 2004, French media reported. The three state-run networks that showed the Olympics sent some 400 journalists and support staff to China for the event. Sports themselves, and particularly the fate of French teams and athletes, had pride of place on the airwaves, with relatively few human interest stories about China. News of crackdowns on dissent in China took a backseat to coverage of the Russia-Georgia crisis, which exploded on the eve (August 7) of the opening ceremony. An ambush that killed 10 French soldiers in Afghanistan August 18 also shifted the spotlight away from Beijing. Nonetheless, most French newspapers ran stories throughout the games documenting what the daily Liberation called China's steps to "muzzle" opposition to the Communist Party. In this vein, the disappearance of Zeng Jinyan, wife of human rights activist Hu Jia, at the onset of the

Games received prominent play in major French papers.

French Remain Skeptical About China

13. (C) Nothing in the media altered the skeptical views prevalent among elites and others in French society on China's global role, said Francois Godement, director of the Asia Center think-tank and professor at Sciences Po, France's top political science university. Especially in the current economic climate, French people tend to think of China in terms of an economic threat -- a bastion of unregulated growth and U.S.-style unfettered capitalism on a grand scale. "China has replaced the United States as the bogeyman in France terms of the negative effects of globalization," Godement said. France-China relations hit bottom during the Olympic torch's chaotic passage through Paris, which occurred at a time when the French media was giving major, often highly critical, coverage to China's crackdown in Tibet. Godement observed that the images coming from China in the wake of the torch relay fiasco -- in particular the protests at Carrefour stores in China and the threats to French diplomats and journalists -- were "profoundly offensive" to French people. When the Olympics ended, people switched off their televisions and forgot about the medal count. But they remembered the anti-France rhetoric coming from China in the run-up to the Games, Godement remarked.

PARIS 00001890 002 OF 002

Government Policy to Stay "Reactive"

14. (C) Nonetheless, China's increased media exposure this spring and summer in connection with the Olympics has not galvanized officialdom to reexamine the nature of France-China ties. Arnaud Rohmer, a senior staff member on the National Assembly's foreign affairs committee, said the Olympics had little effect in terms of French parliamentarians' views of China. "We tend to take a pragmatic, realistic approach to Asia," Rohmer said, adding that there are no rumblings in the committee for having any special hearings on China issues. No one on the foreign affairs committee is agitating for President Sarkozy or the MFA to change strategy on China, Rohmer said. In Godement's view, official and public interest in the financial crisis, Russia-Georgia and Afghanistan elbows aside any focus on East Asia. In addition, the Middle East is a hardy perennial priority for the French, he concluded.

15. (C) In this context, the French approach to China and East Asia at large remains too "reactive," our contacts who specialize in the region complained. Criticizing the lack of planning and vision for France's role in the region, MFA Deputy Director for East Asia Fabrice Mauries groused to us that the government's approach is simply to react to events (ref B). Valerie Niquet, the Asia Director for the French Institute for International Relations (IFRI), assessed that President Sarkozy's hesitation about attending the opening ceremony only served to irritate the Chinese and paid few political dividends at home. According to a Le Figaro newspaper poll printed August 20, some 61 percent of French approved of the president's presence at the ceremony.

Hopes for Increased Openness Dashed

16. (SBU) Opinion pages in the wake of the games mixed praise for China's athletic and logistical accomplishments with criticism of its record on human

rights. While China wanted to present itself as a benevolent power, the daily Le Monde wrote, the crackdown on dissent before and during the Games "continues to cast doubt" on this image. Liberation took a similar dim view, stressing that "far from liberalizing the country, the Games on the contrary permitted the reinforcing of controls on Chinese society." As Le Figaro put it August 25, "China disappointed the hopes of those who thought granting (Beijing) the Games would inspire more openness and cause an evolution toward increased democracy."

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